



What is the Research Natural Area?



The Research Natural Area, or RNA, adds a new layer of protection for the marine resources of Dry Tortugas National Park. The RNA is a 46 square-mile no-take ecological preserve that provides a sanctuary for species affected by fishing and loss of habitat in this region of the Gulf. The RNA also provides opportunities for boaters, divers, snorkelers, and researchers to explore and study the significant marine environment protected within Dry Tortugas National Park.

Why Is It Necessary?

In 1992, Congress created Dry Tortugas National Park "to protect and interpret a pristine subtropical marine ecosystem, including an intact coral reef community" that is generally regarded as one of the most well-preserved marine areas in the Florida Keys. The park's founding legislation also stated that the park would protect fish and wildlife and provide opportunities for scientific research.

While commercial fishing has long been off-limits in the park, scientific studies have documented significant declines in the size and abundance of important gamefish, including grouper, snapper, and grunts. Closure of this portion of the park to fishing provides a refuge for both juvenile and mature fish, fish that ultimately fuel the commercial and recreational fishing industries in the Florida Keys.

Fish are not the only species facing trouble. Corals have declined precipitously in recent decades; staghorn corals in particular have declined by 99% since 1977. The RNA will provide a living laboratory for scientists to study the reasons for these declines.

While the natural resources have been declining, visitation to the Dry Tortugas has quadrupled since 1994. More visitors has meant more impacts on the park's resources. The RNA will significantly reduce impacts to this area.

The need for the RNA can be compared to hurricane preparation. You don't wait until the storm hits to put on your hurricane shutters; you prepare in advance to protect your home and property. The National Park Service has chosen a management method of preventive maintenance and monitoring to ensure the health of the park's ecosystem.

Can I Still Go There?

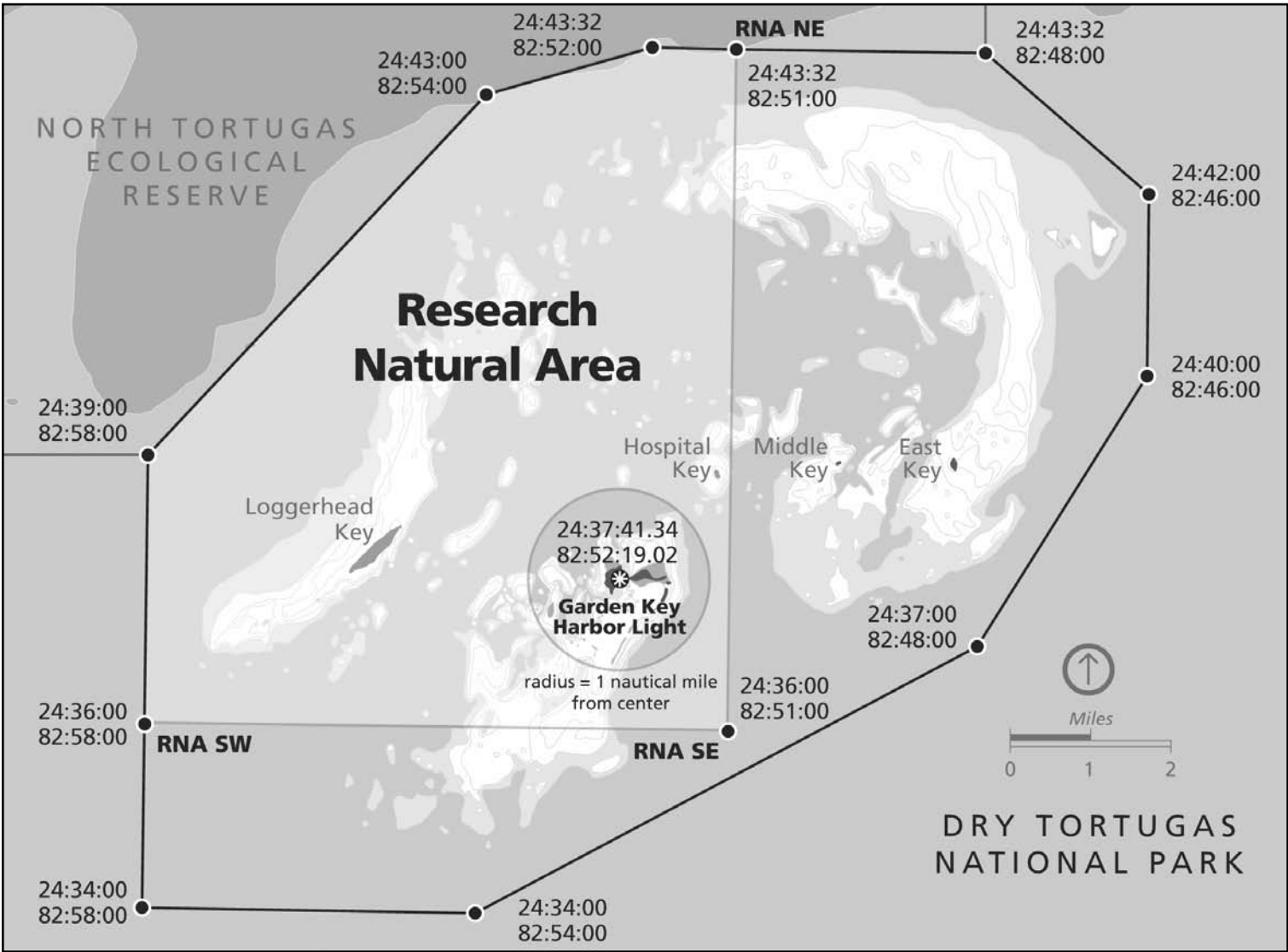
Yes! The RNA is a no-fishing zone, but not a no-people zone. Approved activities include boating, swimming, snorkeling, scuba diving, research, and education. The new rule prohibits anchoring and fishing and requires the park to implement a permit system for all recreational

vessels. Check at Garden Key for current status of the permit program. Anchoring in sand is permitted until the park installs mooring buoys. While you're in the RNA, you might see staff studying the wildlife to measure the benefits of the new area and enforcing the new regulations.

Where Is It?

The Research Natural Area is a 46-square-mile area in the northwest portion of the park. It is the area enclosed by connecting with straight lines the coordinates of 82:51:00 W and 24:36:00 N with 82:58:00 W and 24:36:00 N, and with 82:51:00 W and 24:43:32 N. Not included

in the RNA is an area one nautical mile in diameter around the Garden Key Light, and the developed areas of Loggerhead Key. Before boating in the park, please key these points into your GPS system. See the map on reverse for additional guidance.



What Are the Rules?

PERMITS: Permits will be required for all vessels in the park, including the RNA, but not as of this printing. The only vessels exempt from this rule are those transiting the area without interruption. Check at Garden Key or the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center in Key West for permit program updates.

CLOSED TO FISHING: All fishing is prohibited within the RNA. Fish and fishing gear must be stowed prior to entry and during transit through the RNA. Operators of vessels that possess lobster or speared fish are asked to contact park staff via VHF 16 and declare catch brought into the park.

ANCHORING: Until a permit and buoy system are in place, vessels may anchor in the RNA only on sandy bottom. Commercial fishing vessels in the park are only allowed to anchor at Bird Key harbor and not in the RNA.

DISCHARGE MATERIALS: Discharging materials of any kind in the RNA is prohibited other than cooling water or engine exhaust.

LOGGERHEAD KEY: Loggerhead Key is open to the public, but a permit system will limit the number of daily visitors. Boat landing is permitted only south of the dock or south of the boathouse. The interior of Loggerhead Key is closed except on established trails. Swimming and snorkeling are only allowed in designated areas north of the dock and north of the boathouse.

UNDERWATER FEATURES: Removing or otherwise injuring coral or other living or dead organisms anywhere in the park is prohibited. Vessel operators are not allowed to strike or injure coral or seagrass, or to allow an anchor or other device to harm underwater features. Tampering with shipwrecks and other submerged cultural resources and removing or moving artifacts is prohibited.

How Can I Help?

The Research Natural Area will not succeed without your help. When visiting the RNA, follow the new regulations, and if you are confused by them, ask a ranger in advance of your visit. For more information visit the park website at www.nps.gov/drto or contact the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center at 305-809-4750.

Dry Tortugas National Park was created to preserve and protect nationally significant cultural and natural resources for present and future generations. Working together, we can ensure that the pristine areas we enjoy today will be preserved for generations far beyond our own.